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(Article begins on next page)

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Women's Participation in Voluntary Associations in Italy

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Definition

Voluntary associations could be laboratories for testing different organizational forms, in which women could have (a) a greater chance (than in for-profit organizations) of participating actively in the association and (b) more access to managerial and leadership roles. For this goal, volunteers need organizational rules and ► norms oriented toward encouraging them to participate in all organizational roles.

Description

Introduction

► Volunteerism is an extremely fascinating context for social science scholars: lacking the economic variable of the relationship within the working group, it is possible to investigate the phenomena of teamwork without the bonds that generally characterize for-profit organizations (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). Women's participation is among the topics investigated (Einolf, 2011). According to studies conducted in Italy, the number of women engaged in volunteerism has

increased year by year, and women currently account for 50.8 % of the entire national volunteer population. A third of these women have ► leadership roles, and in 70 % of all cases, such roles are performed in associations with a predominantly female membership (i.e., at least 60 %). Of all the ► voluntary associations in Italy, 30.2 % are made up largely or entirely of women, while 40.5 % have an all-male membership. Of those with male and female members, 37.7 % women account for between 0 % and 33 % of all members, while 32.2 % have a female membership of between 34 % and 66 %. As for the characteristics of women who provide volunteer services in largely female associations, 56.3 % are over 45 years of age (in the predominantly male voluntary associations, the percentage for this age group is less than half), and 63 % are women who turn to voluntary activities at the end of their working life (i.e., after retirement) or do not have a job (students, housewives) (Frisanco, 2001; ~~International Society of Transport Aircraft Trading~~ [ISTAT], 2005). As shown in previous research (see Pearce, 1993), voluntary associations also attract volunteers because of their different organizational approach (in terms of rules and patterns) compared to for-profit groups. Men and women who are members of voluntary associations may have an opportunity to acquire new skills (e.g., to study history and art to accompany tourists visiting a museum) or to put some particular competence into practice that they would otherwise have no particular use for (e.g., teaching disadvantaged young

people to play the guitar) or that is of no particular relevance in ordinary life (e.g., driving a car to accompany patients). In this particular context, do women have a greater chance (than in for-profit organizations) of participating actively in the association, do they have more access to managerial and leadership roles?

Method

In order to answer these questions, an investigation was conducted involving 91 volunteers. They belong to different types of associations: organizations engaged in social work, support for cooperation and development projects, cultural promotion, emergency services, environmental protection, safeguarding human and civil rights, and health care (13 volunteers from each association). Women accounted for 57.2 % of the participants, whose age ranged from 16 to 73 (median, 45 years). They answered questions such as how are dates and times defined for group activities (e.g., meetings) and individual activities (e.g., shifts in the soup kitchen), when and how are decisions made, and what characteristics are required to become a manager or leader. ► **Content analysis** methodology (Ghiglione, 1980) was used to analyze the text material collected; the statistical program Alceste 4.6 (Analyse de Lexèmes Cooccurents dans les Enoncés Simples d'un Texte – by Reinert, 1987) was also used to obtain the most frequently used words and the internal organization of the discourse.

Result

The data gathered indicate that volunteers (women and men) need organizational rules and ► **norms** oriented toward encouraging them to participate in all organizational roles, including leadership and management roles. If voluntary associations do not adopt flexible rules and settings, they risk failure: voluntary associations need to create an atmosphere that is more able to accommodate everybody's needs. Participants reported that managerial and leadership roles are assigned both on the basis of men's and women's views about who should assume such roles and on the type of work that the voluntary association does. Many women (generally aged >55 years)

actually prefer men to hold certain roles that they associate more with males, such as money management or group leadership. Voluntary associations could have an important function in changing this type of mentality, by giving women (of all ages) a chance to try their hand at these roles. As for the type of work engaged in by the voluntary association, as Eagly's work has shown (Eagly & Carli, 2007), leadership is – at least in Italy – still linked to expectations regarding ► **gender** roles. Voluntary associations are not exempt from the social and cultural processes at work elsewhere. The data from this investigation indicate that women are more likely to be chosen as leaders in women's volunteer groups, where their behavior more closely reflects gender stereotypes and the association's values and norms (see Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Data gathered during the interviews confirm this rule: an increase in the number of men in an association could disrupt the group's equilibrium. That equilibrium can be restored by redistributing assignments, but new assignments could penalize women's leadership and managerial roles in order to preserve the stereotype that fosters their participation and inclusion (Martin, 2003). From the literature and data gathered, it emerges that an association's norms and values are the crucial elements that determine which of the volunteer group members are singled out for roles as leaders and managers. The leader in particular is required to guarantee and preside over not only the association's mission but also its vision, so that its specific character can be perpetuated. The vision is perpetuated through recognition for work done. In particular, ceremonies contain rites and rituals that reinforce the type of conduct for which volunteers are symbolically rewarded (e.g., with medals). The goal is to build a sense of belonging to the group, and this is essential for volunteers because it strengthens the processes of inclusion and participation (Farmer & Fedor, 2003), enabling members to express themselves and feel welcome, accepted, to take on responsibilities, to try their hand at new roles.

Discussion

So, how is it possible to support women to enable them to express their potential within voluntary associations? The answer is to be found in the commitment of their members to remove obstacles to women's participation, to establish norms to welcome and integrate diversity, and to help balance the demands that a dual presence in the workplace and the domestic sphere can entail. Women of all ages (but also most of the men in our investigation) wanted voluntary associations to remove all barriers to participation, including problems involved in balancing an individual's many responsibilities (e.g., work or school and family).

Voluntary associations – like all for-profit and not-for-profit organizations – could benefit from greater diversity in gender (but also in age, knowledge, skills, ethnicity, and so on) first in their members and consequently in the people who occupy managerial and leadership roles. This could have a positive impact on life within the association and result, for example, in more time being dedicated to the decision-making process and more new ideas about how to acquire resources (fund-raising and/or recruiting more volunteers) (Hackman, 2002). Greater diversity among members could enable each volunteer to improve the ways in which they participate, not only in the activities of voluntary associations but also in for-profit organizations: if good relationships are established, this approach could be an example for all organizations to follow. Thus, voluntary associations are being asked to devote more attention to each individual's skills, desires, and ► **capabilities** and to bear in mind that all volunteers have the right to aspire to lead the life they can and want to lead (Singh, 2002). What could voluntary association leaders do? First, they need to reflect on the association's mission and vision, the effect of these on the association's norms and values, the type of ► **decision-making processes** adopted by the group, and the resulting efforts to provide support and closure. This reflection is also essential if the association is to survive. Volunteers – both men and women – describe the failure of the process of inclusion and participation as one of the factors

that cause voluntary associations to fall apart. In such cases, change must necessarily come from within the organization. Moreover, from the data gathered, it emerged that voluntary associations that do not adopt norms and values oriented toward acceptance and involvement put their own survival at risk: members could move to another association or set up their own association in which the rules and settings are more oriented toward participation, flexibility, and inclusiveness. This process is not possible in for-profit organizations, whereas in voluntary associations, people are not bound by formal contracts but by emotional and affective ties and by their own sense of responsibility, so they can choose to leave the association and voluntary activities, change the association from within (e.g., by becoming a leader), or create one of their own (alone or with other members of the same association). Change could prove particularly constructive for women: after gaining experience with one association, they could create another more suited to their needs and explore new roles. Essentially, if a voluntary association is unable to meet the current needs of people (and society), it is destined to fail. This process carries the risk of fragmentation, a phenomenon that is already present in the Italian context: in 2003, for each organization that closed down, more than 10 new ones were registered (ISTAT, 2005). New organizations could adopt a different vision, a strategy that fosters inclusion and participation of women and young people, who are the future of volunteer work. And this could create a virtuous circle: if volunteering is satisfying, the voluntary association is more likely to attract new people who can contribute to fueling its mission and vision (Mattsson & Stenbacka, 2003): the data obtained indicate that one of the major channels through which people access volunteer work is that of friends and acquaintances who promote the voluntary association on the basis of their experience with it. Therefore, a very important aspect that emerged from the interviews is the birth of the association, the moment when the founders declare its mission and vision; the rules, norms, and values shared by all members; and the ability of members to

250 comply with these. Furthermore, when women
251 set up a new association, they must have a role
252 in proposing and stimulating change toward an
253 organizational style and climate that is more in
254 line with their needs and desires. This process
255 could be difficult, as men and women who have
256 experienced failure could repeat the same orga-
257 nizational mistake. In the interviews, some vol-
258 unteers expressed the need to understand which
259 organizational models are best suited to women
260 and how these can be adapted to voluntary asso-
261 ciation contexts. Voluntary associations show
262 considerable promise as laboratories for testing
263 different organizational forms, as this investiga-
264 tion indicates that voluntary associations are
265 potentially more easily adaptable to suit their
266 member's needs.

267 Cross-References

268 ► [Participation in Civil Society](#)

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